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Death of Australian Dream: pets pay the price

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It's not just houses among gum trees on ¼ acre blocks under threat from the supposed death of the Australian Dream; a report shows man's best friend is also victim to a shift in where and how we live.

Dog and cat ownership is down across Australia, according to a report from the Australian Companion Animal Council that found high-density living, changing lifestyles and government legislation to blame.

The ACAC paper found that in the past decade Australia's dog population has decreased by at least 14per cent and its cat population has dropped by about 10 per cent, as latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows a decline in the rate of home ownership and rise human population.

Queensland figures from the Office of Economic and Statistical Research reflected the national downturn in pet ownership, with dog ownership in the state falling by 2.1 per cent from 2008 to 2010 as cats dropped by 1.4per cent.

The ACAC paper found slightly more than half of the state's households accommodated cats and/or dogs in 2010.

And though pooches were more popular than pussies overall, Brisbane was among the survey regions with the lowest proportion of households with dogs.

Speaking from the inaugural Putting Pets Back Into Our Lives thinktank in Sydney, ACAC president Kersti Seksel said the steady decline in pet ownership had brought a \$6.02billion pet-care industry to its knees.

But it wasn't just commerce at risk as communities without pets were worse off as well, Ms Seksel said.

“There's been lots of research showing pets are not just good for an individual's physical health and mental health – if you own a dog for instance, you're less likely to be lonely and more likely to get physical exercise – but you're also more likely to interact with your community,” she said.

“All pets are down, but we're focusing particularly on a decline in cat and dog ownership because there's a lot of research that demonstrates the valuable relationships they share with owners.”

Ms Seksel said the costs associated with maintaining pets, difficulty in finding care during holidays, time constraints and moving to rented accommodation, particularly apartments, were the most common reasons why people no longer included animals in their households.

“There's a perception that renting or apartment living don't work with owning a dog but that's just not true,” she said.

“If you look at America, you see that dog ownership in small space is fine as long as you're caring properly for the pet.”

A change in Australia's favourite breed of dog reflected a shift to inner-city living Ms Seksel said, with the diminutive Maltese ousting the German Shepherd from the top spot that the larger dog enjoyed 10 years ago.

Ms Seksel said the 150 participants in today's Putting Pets Back Into Our Lives conference, including the RSPCA, hoped to find suitable solutions to the problem.

“Whether it's changing the laws and regulations around pet ownership or educating the public about finding the right pet for them, we want people to realise just how good owning a pet can be,” Ms Seksel said.



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